

HADĪTH

STATUS AND ROLE

An Introduction to the Prophet's Tradition

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In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

Introduction

ḤADĪTH AND THE SHAPING OF ISLAMIC LIFE

Perhaps no discipline has been subject to such attack over the entire period of Islamic history as has Ḥadīth. Attacks have been mounted from every quarter; some openly hostile, others subtle; some assuming an academic guise, others pretending to give due importance to the Qur'an. The fact is that since the early divisions within the Muslim community, leading to momentous changes in the leadership and the way the Muslim state was run, the Prophet's statements and traditions became a free-for-all, frequently raided by people who had no love for Islam or the Muslim community. Several groups of widely differing interests fabricated statements which they attributed to the Prophet, hoping to win support for their own political ambitions or deviant ideas. Some even came up with fabricated statements encouraging people to be stronger in faith and more diligent in worship. When reproached for their action and reminded of the authentic ḥadīth sternly warning anyone who knowingly attributes a falsehood to the Prophet, they absurdly retorted: "We are fabricating statements for him, not against him."

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In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

DIVINE WISDOM REFLECTED BY ḤADĪTH SCIENCES

The study of Ḥadīth is a science to which God guided the Muslim community in its early periods to pay much attention to. Thus the Muslim community has worked hard to preserve, document, and disseminate it, as well as to collect, check and ensure the accuracy of every ḥadīth attributed to the Prophet ﷺ. Indeed it has given much attention to every discipline and branch of study related to Ḥadīth. This clear guidance reflects God's wisdom and the special care He attached to the preservation and perfection of the Islamic faith. It has given the Muslim community an inborn and powerful motivation that it cannot suppress or overlook. It works like an effective drive, which is apparently too powerful to resist, but inherently too gentle to constitute any burden. On the contrary, the Muslim community derives much pleasure and inspiring gratification from responding to this powerful motivation. Hence, efforts have always been exerted, difficulties removed, and journeys undertaken in order to seek and collect *aḥādīth* from their reporters and transmitters. Great care has been taken to ensure the accurate reporting and transmission of *aḥādīth* from one locality to another. To this end, countless scholars, endowed with great intelligence and scholarship, dedicated themselves. Indeed no other community or civilization in the history of mankind can demonstrate similar care given to a discipline or branch of study.

As Prophethood is Sealed

All that we have said reflects God's definite purpose. It proves the great care God has attached to Prophet Muhammad's message, which is the final message He has sent to mankind, outlining the law that He has laid down for human life in all generations and communities to the end of time. It was His guidance that spurred the Muslim community to undertake different types of study at different times, as was necessary for a clear understanding of His message. Thus, we find the Muslim community paying much attention, at different times, to the preservation of the Ḥadīth, and to the deduction of rulings and their detailed application; to the pursuit of sciences derived from the Qur'an, such as linguistics, word-derivation and stylistics; to the production of dictionaries and the establishment of schools to teach the Qur'an and the Sunnah, as also paying special attention to character refinement, morality and self purification; to addressing the essence of faith and achieving a special degree of excellence in faith; and to paying careful consideration to the Prophet's guidance for the well being of heart and soul. These and other aspects of the guidance God has given to a long line of scholars, who combined a refined degree of faith and piety with in-depth knowledge and dedicated pursuit of learning, provide very clear evidence that, with Muhammad's message which He has perfected, God has brought the line of prophethood to its conclusion. It also indicates that divine care and preservation of Islam, as well as His support of its advocates, will never fail.

Better than Statues and Legends

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ occupies a unique position among all God's messengers and great men in history. He is the

one about whom our knowledge covers all aspects of life, including his habits, manners, inclinations and desires, as well as his words and deeds, in detail and to an extent that is unmatched by our knowledge of anyone who died recently, or even of those who are our contemporaries. All this is due to the study of Ḥadīth which has documented for us his blessed life in all its details.

Old civilizations and followers of ancient religions used to draw images and paintings, or build statues of their prophets to represent them and to serve as reminders to contemporary and succeeding generations. This tradition gave birth to idolatry, as such statues came to be seen as idols and objects of worship. Different nations and communities continue to suffer from this legacy. God has been very kind to the Muslim community and to humanity at large when He prohibited the drawing of images of prophets and historical figures or the erecting of statues for anyone. He substituted all this by the Ḥadīth which provides a great number of speaking images that give us thorough knowledge of the Prophet ﷺ. We feel the happiness of his company as though we are with him, listening to his guidance, witnessing his actions and studying his life. For such a wealth of information to have been lost would have been a disaster of tragic proportions.

A Standard Measuring the Community's Worth

The Ḥadīth also provides an accurate barometer for reformers to evaluate the trends prevailing in their community so as to determine the extent of any deviation in the course it follows. An appropriate balance in morality, manners and actions can only be achieved through the Qur'an and the Ḥadīth combined. This is the only way to fill the vacuum that occurred when God's Messenger ﷺ passed away. Such a vacuum is part of God's law in this life.

وَمَا مُحَمَّدٌ إِلَّا رَسُولٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ الرُّسُلُ... (١٤٤)

“Muhammad is only a Messenger: all messengers have passed away before him...” [Āl ‘Imrān 3: 144].

إِنَّكَ مَيِّتٌ وَإِنَّهُمْ مَيِّتُونَ (٣٠)

“You, [Muhammad,] are certainly bound to die, and they, too, are certainly bound to die.” [Al-Zumar 39: 30].

The Ḥadīth provides an accurate representation of a perfectly balanced life. It outlines detailed directives by the Prophet ﷺ that are full of wisdom, and rulings that the Prophet ﷺ applied to Islamic society. Without these, the Muslim community would have erred so as to either indulge in excess or be complacent. Thus, imbalance would have prevailed. Furthermore, we would have lost the practical example God has required us to follow:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسْوَةٌ حَسَنَةٌ... (٢١)

“In God's Messenger you certainly have a good example to follow...” [Al-Aḥzāb 33: 21].

قُلْ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ تُحِبُّونَ اللَّهَ فَاتَّبِعُونِي يُحْبِبْكُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ ذُنُوبَكُمْ
وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ (٣١)

“Say: If you love God, follow me; God will love you and forgive you your sins.” [Āl ‘Imrān 3: 31].

Indeed it is from the Prophet's example that we derive confidence and strength, as well as reassurance that the implementation of Islam in life is both easy and practical.

Strong Motive for Reform and Resisting Deviation

The Prophet's Ḥadīth, which is a name that covers his verbal statements and practical guidance in general, is full of life, at once both powerful and persuasive. It has always strengthened people's motives to follow the Prophet's guidance and enhanced their God-fearing sense. It continues to motivate people to resist corruption and deviation from the right path. The Ḥadīth has indeed been the prime factor in the rise of many a reformer calling for emancipation that eliminates unwarranted practices, superstition and un-Islamic traditions, and advocating a full return to Islam in its pure and original version. Hence, for the Muslim community, the Ḥadīth is essential. It must be collected, documented and disseminated.

Delayed Documentation in the First Generation

Although a few of the Prophet's companions wrote down the *aḥadīth* and had their own collections,¹ many of them, particularly 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb ؓ, were highly reluctant to do so. 'Umar ؓ was very wise, and endowed with exceptional foresight in whatever related to the interests of Islam and Muslims as well as to the future of the Islamic religion. He, and others among the Prophet's companions, preferred to allow some time to pass before paying attention to the writing down and circulation of *aḥadīth*. Dr Muṣṭafā al-Sibā'ī, an eminent contemporary specialist in Ḥadīth, rightly says:

Added to this was 'Umar's desire that they should not frequently quote the Prophet's ḥadīth so that people

¹ Al-Sibā'ī, Muṣṭafā, *Al-Sunnah wa Makānatuhā fi al-Tashrī' al-Islamī*, Damascus, pp. 58-66.

were not be preoccupied with ḥadīth in preference to the Qur'an.² At the time, the Qur'an was still a new revelation which the Muslims needed to study, memorize and make sure of its meanings. Al-Sha'bī quotes the following report by Qurazāh ibn Ka'b: "We set out on a journey to Iraq. 'Umar went with us to Ṣirār. He then stopped, did his ablutions and offered a two-*rak'ah* prayer before saying to us: 'Do you know why I have walked this far with you?' We said: 'Yes. We are the Prophet's companions and you liked to walk with us.' He said: 'You will come upon people who recite the Qur'an frequently, making a noise similar to the buzzing of bees. Do not give them the ḥadīth to divert their attentions. Pay more attention to the Qur'an and make only infrequent quotations from God's Messenger ﷺ. Set forth and I am your partner.' When Qurazāh arrived in Iraq, people asked him to tell them something of the Ḥadīth, but he refused, saying, 'Umar has ordered us not to do so.'"³

'Urwah ibn al-Zubayr (may God have mercy on him) reports that 'Umar ؓ intended to write down the ḥadīth,

² As happened in earlier religions and communities, when divine revelations became inextricably mixed with statements by prophets, scholars, and commentaries on scriptures, etc. The best example is the Jews' attitude to the Torah and the Talmud. It is often the case that the Talmud is more revered and relied upon than the Torah. Indeed the Jews often recite and study the Talmud, which contains the verbal laws and other Jewish traditions, more extensively than the Torah. The Talmud, which is often found in 12 volumes, contains commentaries, footnotes and quotes from rabbis and other Jewish figures.

³ Al-Sibā'ī, op.cit. p. 63, quoting Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi' Bayān al-Ilm*. Vol.2, p. 120.